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# LOCKE ON KNOWLEDGE OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

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Text source:

*Essay Concerning Human  
Understanding*, bk. 4, ch. 11; see also  
bk. 4, ch. 2, sec. 14

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## LOCKE ON ‘SENSITIVE KNOWLEDGE’

- “*The notice we have by our senses of the existing of things without us*, though it be not altogether so certain, as our intuitive knowledge, or the deductions of our reason, employed about the clear abstract reasonings of our own minds; yet it is an assurance that *deserves the name knowledge*.” (ECHU 4.11.3)
  - And, somewhat more hedged: “There is, indeed, another perception of the mind employed about *the particular existence of finite beings without us*, which going beyond bare probability, and yet not reaching perfectly to [the certainty of by logical and mathematical reasoning], passes under the name *knowledge*.” (ECHU 4.2.14)
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# THE LIMITS OF SENSITIVE KNOWLEDGE

- Locke says that we only have sensitive knowledge of the existence of particular things accessible to our senses right now: *“this knowledge extends only as far as the present testimony of our senses, employed about particular objects, that do then affect them, and no farther”* (EHU 4.11.9.)
    - So our beliefs about non-present external things can only rise to the level of (what Locke calls) ‘opinion’ or ‘probability’, not knowledge properly so-called (since its not totally certain and infallible).
    - In much of our lives we will simply be guided by probable opinion. This is okay as a way to run your life (Locke says), but we shouldn’t confuse it with knowledge strictly so called.
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# THE CHALLENGE OF EXTERNAL WORLD SKEPTICISM

The external world skeptic asks us:

(i) *How can we know for certain that there is an external world answering to our sensory ideas?*

A more radical skeptic might further ask:

(ii) *Do we have any reason at all to think that there is an external world answering to our sensory ideas?*

Or even: (iii) *Is it even intelligible to talk about an external world beyond our ideas? (Is this even a thinkable hypothesis?)*

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# LOCKE'S ANTI-SKEPTICAL ARGUMENTS

(1) Some of our ideas come *unbidden*.

“If I turn my eyes to at noon toward the sun I cannot avoid the ideas which the light or the sun then produces in me.” (EHU 4.11.5)

(2) Some ideas differ from others in terms of their *vivacity*, and these bolder ideas presumably are caused by an external world (rather than our own imaginings or dreamings). (EHU 4.2.14, 4.11.6)

(3) “Our senses in many cases bear witness to the truth of each other’s reports concerning the existence of sensible things without us” (EHU 4.11.7)

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# LOCKE'S ANTI-SKEPTICAL ARGUMENTS (*continued*)

- (4) If we question our faculties in the way the skeptic asks us to, then we lose all grasp on what it would even be to know something. So we cannot talk sense about knowledge at all unless we already accept that our faculties are at least broadly reliable, and thus that there is an external world answering to our ideas. (EHU 4.11.3)
- (5) It is really impossible to be a skeptic; no-one can really doubt these things, however much they may pretend to do so (EHU 4.11.3).
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# LOCKE'S PRAGMATIC ANTI-SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

(6) Locke's pragmatic move:

(i) Our belief in material things allows us to avoid pain and pursue pleasure in certain systematic ways, and “this certainty is as great as our happiness or misery, beyond which we have no concernment to know” (EHU 4.2.14).

Similarly, (ii) “I think GOD has given me assurance enough of the existence of things without me; since by their different application, I can produce in myself both pleasure and pain, which is the one great concernment of my present state.” (EHU 4.3.11)

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## LOCKE'S PRAGMATIC ANTI-SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT (*continued*)

Similarly, (iii) “*the certainty of things existing [in the nature of things] when we have the testimony of our senses for it, is not only as great as our frame can attain to, but as our condition needs. For our faculties being suited not to the full extent of being, nor to a perfect, clear, comprehensive knowledge of things free from all doubt and scruple; but to the preservation of us, in whom they are; and accommodated to the use of life: they serve our purpose well enough, if they will but give us the certain notice of those things, which are convenient or inconvenient to us. For he that sees a candle burning, and has experimented the force of its flame, by putting his finger in it, will little doubt, that this is something existing without him, which does him harm, and puts him to great pain: which is assurance enough, when no man requires greater certainty to govern his actions by, that what is as certain as his actions themselves.*” (EHU 4.11.8)

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